



THE BOTANIST



Run Time: 96 minutes

Written and Directed by Jing Yi
Produced by Shan Zuolong and Qi Ai

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Logline

In a remote valley village along the northern border of Xinjiang, China, a lonely Kazakh boy finds solace in the company of plants. As he searches for traces of lost time, he gradually immerses himself in a dreamlike allegory of the botanical world.

Synopsis

Set in a remote village in Xinjiang, China, THE BOTANIST follows a young Kazakh boy named Arsin, who finds solace in the company of plants. He soon meets Meiyu, a spirited Han girl whose unpredictable nature reminds him of a rare, otherworldly plant. As their friendship blossoms, it deepens into a delicate, dreamlike allegory that blurs the lines between reality and the enchanting world of botany.

Director's Note

The story takes place in a forgotten valley village on the northern border of Xinjiang, China. The entire film features non-actors, a first-person perspective, and a visual presentation that blends documentary with fiction, all attempting to evoke an alternative reality.

The Kazakh-ethnicity people, as a nomadic group, believe that the souls of the deceased dwell in the grass. If the ultimate belonging of those living on the border is to peacefully reside in the world of plants, then my original intention of making this film is to give my simple blessing to the forgotten people and land, the departed people and events.

With regards to spatio-temporality, I want to create a fantasy-like world in which plants and human beings are interconnected and inseparable. The Kazakh boy's nomadic memories of maternal grandpa, uncle and cousin are revived in different stages of his eternal life. These memories bridge the communication gap between the boy and girl, and plants are the soul of their relationship. Human beings long for eternal love just like the way plants have great passion for seasonal changes.

As for the visual approach, I would like to use the weather change as a hint of the Kazakh boy's state of mind. It is bright in Xinjiang's valley and savannah even on a cloudy day. Being bright yet melancholic, the boy's memory is like a vine that thrives in the dark. His memory is a lonely elegy grieving over destiny as well as a botany "love letter" dedicated to the girl. They are two widely different plants embarking on the same dreamy journey...

Q&A with Jing Yi (Writer & Director)

Your film is set in remote China. Describe the landscape of Xinjiang in your own words, and why you wanted to make a movie in this region.

Xinjiang's landscape is vast and serene, both mysterious and enchanting. Standing beneath such an immense sky and earth, one cannot help but feel a profound sense of insignificance. I was born and raised in Xinjiang, where my family and friends still reside. Choosing to film my debut movie here was my way of reconnecting with the bygone days of my past. Those old memories—like the shimmering, almost ethereal rustle of leaves in a forest—continue to captivate my heart, even as I now live far away.

Your central protagonist is the young Kazakh Arsin, while the movie is framed as Uncle Bek's dream. But the landscape feels like the main character in the movie — would you agree?

Yes, I hope the landscape in my film is not merely a backdrop, but rather a vessel for memory and emotion. To truly understand the landscape is, in many ways, to understand how we weave our own stories through nature.

Arsin is looking for his missing uncle, but he's also searching for other things. What's Arsin looking for beyond Uncle Bek?

Arsin is trying to retrieve the bygone days of his family's memories—perhaps as fleeting as a leaf flickering in light and shadow. As a child, he may not yet fully understand what draws him, but I believe he carries a deep, spiritual yearning.

There is a strong current of folk wisdom on display in this movie — generational stories passed down and ingrained in the characters, even the land. Describe your research for this story, and which specific cultures or traditions you wanted to reflect in the story.

During pre-production, I conducted several field studies in Xinjiang to better understand the unique relationship between the Kazakh people and the region's natural flora—observing everything from daily life to cultural traditions. Rather than focusing solely on specific customs, I aimed to capture the profound survival wisdom and resilient spirit that these people draw from nature.

Describe the allegorical nature of Arsin and Meiyu's relationship in the movie. They feel like much more than two kids in love.

It's a fascinating discovery. Yes, I believe there is a fairy-tale-like, allegorical connection between them. They come from two different ethnic groups with distinct cultures, much like two different

plants coexisting in a quiet corner of the world—a reflection of humanity’s most primal state on Earth. Their bond carries the innocence of the past while hinting at an unknown future... As the winds of fate sweep them through an increasingly uncertain world, I cannot say where destiny will lead them. All I know is they’ll have to keep enduring this.

Arsin’s older brother returns from Beijing and falls into drinking, before ultimately returning to the city. What’s he looking for in life?

The older brother is like most young people in China—on one hand, he wants to make something of himself in the big city, but on the other, he can’t fully let go of his hometown and the people he loves. He’s caught between urban modernization and the traditions of his roots, feeling like he doesn’t quite belong in the city but also not wanting to settle for a quiet life in the village. He moves between these two worlds, feeling lost, trying to find a place where both his body and soul can truly belong—but that’s not easy.

You worked with non-actors in the movie. Using the actors who played Arsin and Meiyu as key examples, describe your approach to working with them and preparing them for these roles.

When it comes to non-professional actors, forgive me for saying this, but the most important thing is that they were naturally the perfect choices for this film—I simply found them (although, in truth, finding them was not so easy). But once I did, it was just a matter of patiently working with them.

For young Arsin, I had him spend time in nature beforehand, searching for plants and preparing herbarium specimens. I wanted him to have the experience of quietly observing plants on his own. Regarding Meiyu, I would have her walk side by side with Arsin, even if they both venture into places beyond my sight. When two people walk together for an extended period, a fascinating chemistry gradually develops. Walking together is a simple yet reassuring act, because Meiyu not only needs to trust me but also her partner. Young actors are incredibly sensitive, and those experiences helped him quickly settle into the rhythm of life in the village.

There is a strong connection between the human characters in the film and the landscape and flora that surrounds them — Arsin dipping his hand in the river while he naps against a tree is but one of many striking examples. What’s your strategy here?

I believe our relationship with natural landscapes isn’t just about passively admiring them; in reality, we exist within them, just as plants do. These landscapes aren’t just objects of aesthetic appreciation—they shape our sensibilities and become part of our memories. Whether it’s feeling the coolness of a river or watching leaves wither, the landscape holds moments that transport us back in time. We don’t just observe nature; we experience it, connect with it, and draw from it a wisdom essential for survival.

Images of incursion haunt this movie: power lines, pop songs, iPhones, radio transmissions hinting at resource extraction. Is incursion or invasion an important theme in this movie?

This is an inescapable reality of living in the present—everyone exists within the changes of their time. I hope this film is not just about nostalgia and lamentation but also an attempt to show how the rapid transformations of our era permeate and shape our lives.

The movie also captures arrivals, departures, and disappearances, and feels linked to seasonal change. Describe the role of circularity in this movie.

You can view Arsin, his older brother, and his uncle as generations carried along by the tides of time. Or, you can view them as parts of the same plant, each at a different stage of life in the endless cycle of the seasons—each stage reflecting both the future and the past.

Time moves in cycles, and within this rhythm, people experience the full range of joy and sorrow, gradually uncovering the destined path of their family's story.

Your images of plant life and landscape are powerful and reverent here — describe working with your director of photography Vanon Li on capturing these images.

In our creative process, we aimed not only to showcase plants within natural landscapes but to imbue their forms with a certain spiritual quality. During pre-production, Vanon explored several ideas and conducted shooting tests, ultimately capturing the plants in the film as gracefully as if they were dancing like ethereal sprites.

On set, we all shared the belief that plants—like us—do more than serve as vessels of emotion; they coexist within the landscape. To reflect this, we experimented with slow, panning shots to create a deeper connection between humanity and nature.

The score is haunting, spare and elegiac, and an Iranian composed it. Describe your approach to music in this movie, and how it relates to the spatio-temporality of the film.

I was truly honored to have Mr. Peyman compose the film's score. From the very beginning, I knew he was the right person. In his initial musical feedback, his expression of the emotional bond between the two children wasn't limited to their interactions; through his score, he brought a gentle touch that transcends time and space, capturing both the lightness and the profound depth of human emotion and destiny.

As the movie progresses, the human characters and the landscape and time itself come to feel indistinguishable. Is this a movie about unity? Do the sun and the moon ultimately embrace?

Perhaps the sun and the moon will never meet, yet they will forever chase each other—day and night—just as humanity carries an eternal yearning for love and connection, much like plants that endure with unwavering spirit through the endless cycle of the seasons.

You studied at the Beijing Film Academy and made several short films. How did they prepare you for making your debut feature?

During those wonderful and carefree days at school, I not only had time to read but also made several short films. Through the process of making them, I gradually discovered the kind of movies I wanted to create. The films I hope to create are always about the distance and time lag between one's personal rhythm and that of the world, always attempting to discover humanity's future within what has been forgotten.

One of your mentors is filmmaker Bi Gan. What's something indelible he taught you that is reflected in *The Botanist*?

Mr. Bi Gan gave me tremendous encouragement and support during the early stages of the script. Ten years ago, when I was just a cinephile, the astonishing creativity of his debut film *Kaili Blues* deeply moved me—it showed me how his exploration of emotion and form highlighted the unique possibilities of cinema. I believe that his influence, along with the impact of that early experience, has stayed with me ever since.

Cast & Crew Bios

JING Yi (Writer & Director) – JING Yi, born in 1994 and raised in Xinjiang, is a graduate of the Beijing Film Academy. His debut feature film, *THE BOTANIST*, was selected as an official project at the Asian Project Market 2023, where it won the New Horse Award. The film also received post-production funding from the Doha Film Institute Grants Programme 2024 Spring session. It will celebrate its world premiere at the 75th Berlin International Film Festival in the Generation Kplus Competition. JING Yi has previously written and directed several short films, often exploring the inner worlds of minority groups in contemporary China.

Yesl JAHSELEH (Cast, “Arsin”) – Kazakh, born and raised in Nileke County, Ili Kazakh Autonomous Prefecture, Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region. A non-professional actor, *The Botanist* is his first leading role in a film.

REN Zihan (Cast, “Meiyu”) – Xibe, born and raised in Chabuchaer Xibe Autonomous County, Ili Kazakh Autonomous Prefecture, Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region. A non-professional actress, *The Botanist* is her first leading role in a film.

SHAN Zuolong (Producer) – SHAN Zuolong is a Chinese film producer. He began his producing career by collaborating with director BI Gan. In 2015, he produced BI Gan's critically acclaimed directorial debut *KAILI BLUES*, which received numerous awards at prestigious film festivals, including the 68th Locarno Film Festival, the 37th Festival des 3 Continents, and the 52nd Golden Horse Film Awards.

All the films he subsequently produced were almost all selected for the top-tier film festivals such as Cannes, Venice, and Berlinale, and distributed worldwide.

In 2018, he co-founded Dangmai Films with BI Gan and produced his second feature film *LONG DAY'S JOURNEY INTO NIGHT*, that premiered at Un Certain Regard of the 71st Festival de Cannes, with a 40 million US dollars worldwide box-office. It is a France-China co-production that is successful both artistically and commercially. It also selected in San Sebastian, New York, Toronto, London, etc.

In 2022, he executive produced the short film *THE WATER MURMURS* which won the Short Film Palme d'or at the 75th Festival de Cannes; In 2023, he produced actor-turned-director LEE Hong-Chi's debut feature *LOVE IS A GUN*, which was selected for competition at the 38th Venice International Film Critics' Week and won the LION OF THE FUTURE "Luigi De Laurentiis" Venice Award for a Debut Film at the 80th Venice International Film Festival. He also co-produced GU Xiaogang's second feature *DWELLING BY THE WEST LAKE* which celebrated its world premiere at the international competition of the 36th Tokyo International Film Festival; In 2024, he produced *THE GREAT PHUKET*, a first feature by Liu Yaonan, which was a co-production between France, Hong Kong, Germany, and Belgium. The film was officially invited to the 74th Berlin International Film Festival's Generation 14plus Competition.

He is currently producing a new debut feature *THE BOTANIST*, a Kazakh story by JING Yi. The project has been selected as one of the official projects for the Asian Project Market 2023 and won the New Horse Award, it has also been selected to receive post-production funding from the Doha Film Institute Grants Programme 2024 Spring session.

He is now also working on Bi Gan's third feature film, *RESURRECTION*, starring Jackson Yee and Shu Qi.

His first feature documentary *SONG OF THE MULBERRIES* won the Best Film Project at Talent Campus Tokyo 2011. He was selected twice at the Berlinale Talents.

QI Ai (Producer) – QI Ai is a young female Chinese film producer. Her producing/co-producing credits or productions involved in include LI Dongmei's *GUO RAN* (IFFR Competition 2025), LEE Hong-Chi's *LOVE IS A GUN* (Venice Critics' Week 2023), WU Lang's *ABSENCE* (Berlinale Encounters 2023), LIU Bing's *LOVE, MY WAY* (Shanghai 2023).

LI Vanon (Director of Photography) – Fannong (Vanon) Li, born and raised in Hangzhou, China, started his path as a filmmaker by making several award-winning documentaries at Zhejiang University where he got his BA in Landscape Design. Then he earned his MFA at USC School Of Cinematic Arts, where he got his ASC award nomination. Being an independent cinematographer, his credits include *Lost in Summer*, which was nominated at San Sebastián International Film Festival and Pingyao International Film Festival, *A Sin Town*, *A Portrait of A Young Man*, etc.

XU Yao (Production Designer) – XU Yao is a production designer based in China. His working credits include *Brief History of a Family* (Sundance 2024, Berlinale 2024), *Summer Blur* (Berlinale Generation 2021), *The Break Away* (Cannes 2021), etc.

LIU Lian (Costume Designer) – Liu Lian is a film production designer and costume designer. Main works include *Reverb*, *To Kill A Mongolian Horse* (Venice Days 2024), *Fishbone* (Busan 2022), *Now.Here* (Berlinale 2023), and *Out of this World* (Venice Days 2021).

LIU Yaonan (Editor) – Liu Yaonan is a screenwriter, director, editor, and artist. He graduated from Beijing Normal University and the École nationale supérieure d'art de Bourges in France. His debut film, *The Great Phuket*, won the Jury Special Award at the 2017 China Film Foundation Wu Tianming Film Fund for Young Talents. In 2022, the film received the post-production fund from the Île-de-France region (in collaboration with CNC). It was an international co-production involving France, China, Hong Kong, Germany, and Belgium. The film was selected for the Generation 14plus competition at the 74th Berlin International Film Festival and won the Best Supporting Actress award at the 2024 Malaysia International Film Festival, as well as the Best Performance Award and Special Mention for Best Screenplay in the Asian Feature Film Competition at the 35th Singapore International Film Festival.

Peyman YAZDANIAN (Composer) – Peyman YAZDANIAN, born in 1969 in Tehran, is an Iranian film composer, pianist, and composer currently based in Paris, France. He has

composed over forty solo piano pieces and continues to create music for films, theater, and multimedia art. Peyman has composed scores for renowned Iranian directors such as Abbas Kiarostami, Jafar Panahi, and Asghar Farhadi. He has also collaborated extensively with Asian filmmakers. He composed the scores for Li Yu's *Buddha Mountain* and *Double Exposure*, as well as *Return To Dust* by Li Ruijun. Additionally, he has worked on multiple films by Lou Ye, including *Flowers of Shanghai* and *Mystery*, winning Best Original Score at both the 47th and 49th Golden Horse Awards.

HAO Gang (Sound Supervisor) – Hao Gang is a Sound Director. His film works include *The Blue Bone*, *The Flowers of War*, and *Record Without Words*. He also worked on the series *Why Try to Change Me Now*.

TANG Qiang (Colorist) – Tang Qiang is a Film Colorist. His works include films selected for Cannes, Venice, Berlinale, and other major international festivals, such as *Caught by the Tides*, *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, *Are You Lonesome Tonight?*, *Green Night*, and *Love is a Gun*. He has also worked on major commercial productions like *Homecoming*, *No More Bets*, *Born to Fly*, *I Am What I Am*, *A Place Called Silence*, *The Movie Emperor*, and *Crazy Alien*. Tang Qiang has long-term collaborations with directors such as Ning Hao and Bi Gan.

ZHANG Xianmin (Artistic Advisor) – Zhang Xianmin is a professor in the Literature Department at the Beijing Film Academy, a film critic, and a curator. He has served as a producer, artistic consultant, or planner for several Chinese films, including *Free and Easy*, *Manchurian Tiger*, *Kaili Blues*, *Old Dog*, *Good Friends*, and *Changfeng Town*. He has also acted in films such as *Rainclouds Over Wushan*, *The Shadowless Tower*, *Girls Always Happy*, and *Love and Bruises*. Zhang has been a jury member at numerous international film festivals, including the Hong Kong International Film Festival, Taipei Film Festival, Busan International Film Festival, Guangzhou International Documentary Film Festival, FIPADOC, Clermont-Ferrand International Short Film Festival, Seoul Digital Film Festival, and the International Film Festival Rotterdam. He has also served as a jury member for the Asian Documentary Fund.

CREDITS

WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY	JING YI
STARRING	YESL JAHSELEH, REN ZIHAN
ARTISTIC ADVISOR	ZHANG XIANMIN
DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY	LI VANON
PRODUCTION DESIGNER	XU YAO
COSTUME DESIGNER	LIU LIAN
EDITED BY	LIU YAONAN, JING YI
MUSIC BY	PEYMAN YAZDANIAN
SOUND SUPERVISOR	HAO GANG
COLORIST	TANG QIANG
LITERARY PLANNERS	DINA HAMIT, YU QING
PRODUCED BY	SHAN ZUOLONG, QI AI
EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS	MORTON SHEN, JIANHAO ANDY AN
CO-EXECUTIVE PRODUCER	WANG BO
PRODUCTION EXECUTIVES	LI TINGWEI, WANG HENGMING
CO-PRODUCERS	JIANHAO ANDY AN, LI XIAOYUAN
ASSOCIATE PRODUCERS	ZHAO YU, CHEN SHUANG
SPECIAL THANKS	WEN MUYE, BI GAN
CAST	
YESL JAHSELEH AS ARSIN	
REN ZIHAN AS MEIYU	
JALEN NURDAOLET AS BROTHER	
SARHET ERAMAZAN AS GRANDMOTHER	
SONGHAT JOMAJAN AS AMAN	